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Thursday Press Conference Transcript

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PART ONE: DRIVERS – Esteban OCON (Force India), Max VERSTAPPEN (Red Bull Racing), Stoffel VANDOORNE (McLaren)

PRESS CONFERENCE

Esteban, back to the scene of your Grand Prix debut where it all started a year ago. In what ways is the driver and competitor that is Esteban Ocon different today from that debutant of August 2016??

Esteban OCON: Yeah, it's been one year already. It has been mega fast, but now I'm not a rookie anymore. What has changed? Not much, I would say, except that I have been learning massively since the beginning. I'm feeling just more comfortable with the weekends, with the races and just working with Formula One teams of course. And yeah, now, it's just I hope going to be easier to race on the tracks that I have already raced last year.

Ten points scoring finishes out of 11 so far this year. Your battle with team-mate Sergio Pérez is one of the stories of the season? Still, though, just the one occasion, at Silverstone, that you have beaten him to the chequered flag. How confident are you that you will start to turn that around in the second half of the season?

EO: Yeah, you know, in the beginning I had a lot to learn definitely. This season I was getting faster and faster in qualifying, I beat him in Budapest, at the last race before the summer break. I'm just getting closer to him all the time. Just giving him a hard time and that's my target for sure. We raced really close now just before the summer break together. I hope that it will me that I've already raced some races last year for the second half and I will make sure I can beat him for the rest of the season.

Thank you. Stoffel, same question in many ways. There's no getting away from the fact that at the beginning of the season the match up with Fernando has been very much in his favour. But just lately you've started to turn it around. Can you tell us what steps you've made to even things up?

Stoffel VANDOORNE: Yeah, for us it's not been a great start to the season, especially with all the trackside problems we have. We missed quite a lot of track time, but lately everything has gone in a good direction. Felt more and more comfortable with the car, with the handling suiting a little bit better my style as well. The last races have been positive. I'm matching very close with Fernando in qualifying and in the races as well. I'm definitely sure that the second part of the season will go in a good direction again.

Well, congratulations on the contract renewal announced before your home GP. This season hasn't gone as you expected in any respect, so was there any doubt that you'd get another chance?

SV: No, there never has been any doubt. The team has been really supportive in the difficult times. Obviously I've been with McLaren for the past couple of years as a young driver and then as a reserve driver, so they know my capabilities. They know the effort I'm putting in with the team and it's good to see that the team is 100 per cent behind me and I'm definitely looking forward to the future with them.

Very well done. Max, coming to you: a front row qualifier here last season, still the only time in your F1 career to date, so long overdue another one. Is this more or less feasible this year than last year?

Max VERSTAPPEN: I don't know. Have I been on the second row this year? I don't know. I think it will be more difficult, but you never know. In general, Red Bull has always been quite OK on this track. We just have to wait and see. It will be quite a special weekend, with so many fans around, so I'm definitely looking forward to that.

And I see you've got the orange on the cap – nice touch. You and Red Bull Racing have made quite a radical tyre selection for this weekend, with only one set of softs and nine sets of ultrasofts – much less conservative than Mercedes and Ferrari. In light of the way things went at Silverstone, are you confident you have the right tyre options for the weekend??

MV: I'll tell you after tomorrow!

Can you tell us a bit more, develop your thoughts on what tomorrow might bring?

MV: Yeah, I don't know. We just have to go out there and see what the balance of the car is and then of course we try some different tyres and we know the degradation and from there on we'll go further into the weekend.

But you would describe this a quite an aggressive selection, clearly?

MV: Looks like. Yep.

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

Q: (Adrian Huber – Agencia EFE) A question for Stoffel. I would like to know if Fernando congratulated you, did he tell you anything and if you would like to have him as a team-mate next year ?

SV: I haven't seen him yet. Is he here? Is he in Spa? OK, I'll probably see him later.

Q: (Adrian Huber – Agencia EFE) Would you like to have him as a team-mate next year

SV: To be honest, it's not up to me to decide who is going to be my team-mate next year. So far we have had a very good relationship together. We have been working very well and it's up to the team to decide who it will be. We know that Fernando is out of contract at the end of this year, so he will make his own decision.

Q: (Frank Woestenburg – Der Telegraaf) Max, there will be approximately 80,000 Dutch fans here this weekend – a lot of orange on the stands. Does it give you extra pressure?

MV: Yeah, I think positive pressure. It's always nice to see so many fans around, especially let's say in qualifying. When you cross the line and you do your lap, hopefully they are cheering, last year they were, so it was good. For sure it brings more pressure but you have to translate that into something positive,

Q: (Walter Kosta - Saarbrücker Zeitung) Stoffel, the Belgian Grand Prix for you is a real home race. Are you a little bit envious, jealous, that Max, as no Belgian countryman, causes a hype with a [sic] *inversion* of his Netherlands countrypeople, who will freak out this weekend?

SV: First of all, I like the way how you got that question. I mean, I think we are in completely different situations. Max has been in Formula One for a while. He's had some success in his career already, while for me I've only been half a year in Formula One and we've barely been fighting for points. I'm pretty sure in the future that when we will be competitive and things start to turn around the Belgians will be a lot of fans here as well.

And Max you were making the point that you are half-Belgian?

MV: Born in Belgium as well.

You were also asking if you qualified in the second row this year? You've done it twice this year: Monaco and Silverstone.

MV: I did? Oh.

Q: (Ralf Woodall - l'Equipe) Max, you raced with Esteban before in F3. He has been one year in Formula One. Can I have your opinion about Esteban and his year in F1?

MV: I think clearly everything is going alright. It's a bit difficult for me to judge as I'm not involved in the team and exactly all that is going on but it's clearly going really well. As a driver I always had good competition with Esteban so for sure he's a good driver.

Q: (Ysef Harding – Xiro Xone News) This week Formula One has announced an e-sports championship for F1. How do all feel about that being that you have all had a chance to play these games – Esteban we've watched you on social media putting some lap times down – to have this championship, to have some young people in an untapped market step in and be part of the F1 community?

EO: Yeah, I think it is a really good thing to give a chance to the people who play on simulators, to give some competition, and to give them a prize at the end. It's something really cool I think. Those people are really talented. We've seen before in other categories that some simulator players they also race for real and they are quite talented. So I think it is a very good thing to show them in public and I'm quite impressed with their skills.

SV: Yeah I think it's a very good initiative. Myself, when I was younger, I was playing a lot of computer games, a lot of racing games and I think it is a great way to get involved into the sport, a great way to develop your skills as well, even though you are not having the exact sensations of being in the real car. I think it is still something very positive for the people who do not always have the possibility to go out there and do go-karts and be involved in the sport. It's a great way to do the sport.

Max, your thoughts. You do a lot of this stuff, don't you?

MV: Yeah. Lately not that much in terms of racing any more but I think in general it took quite a long time compared to some other sports but it's always very positive to have it. If you already look into some other sports at how big it became, it's really interesting to see, so I'm looking forward to how big it can become.

Q: (Arjan Schouten – Ad Sportwereld) Question for Max. It's not only the Dutch fans here, you also have a warm relationship with Spa-Francorchamps, just talking to the circuit. Can you take us through the most difficult and more beautiful part of the lap, for you?

MV: Most difficult... I think that changes every year with the car balance you have. I like the second sector where you have a lot of fast corners in a row. I think that's definitely the most beautiful as well to take because, at the end of the day, Eau Rouge is very nice, the scenery is very nice but it's easy flat-out at the moment.

Most difficult?

MV: Sector Two. It depends on what car balance you have.

Q: (Livio Oricchio – globoesporte.com) Max, you have a new version of the power unit here from Renault. Do you believe with this possible upgrade from the power unit and the characteristics of your car normally very well adapted for this track, you can be very close to Mercedes and Ferrari or maybe even beat them?

MV: To be honest I think it's just a bit of fine tuning. I don't expect any miracles to happen here. I think like they said as well, it's just mapping and controls, so it's not like giving you suddenly a lot more horsepower.

Q: (Adrian R Huber – Agencia EFE) Question for Esteban. Obviously you're not here to make friends, you're here to race and compete but after 11 grands prix together I want to know which are your feelings towards Checo?

EO: All our relationship has been good together. Even if we had some touches in a few races, we always had talks after the race. Yeah, at the moment nothing has changed since before, since when I started the season.

Q: (Graham Harris – Motorsport Monday) Question for all three of you. For the start of the second half of the season, you've had four weeks off. What did the three of you get up to during that period of time and what proportion was training and what proportion was holiday?

SV: It was good to get a bit of free time, especially after the last month before the summer break was very busy with three races, even some testing in between as well. So yeah, it was good to take a little bit of a break. I had a good time off with some friends and really not thinking about the racing, doing what I wanted to do, and then yeah, the last week before Spa I started back into the normal regime: normal training and prepare as usual for a grand prix week.

Max?

MV: I had 11 days off, and even on the holiday, of course you do some training, to stay up to date. From there onwards you just do your normal thing again.

Esteban?

EO: Yeah, I was in Spain with friends. I had ten days off, everyone, I think, just having fun. Not to think about racing. Still training a little bit but then just relaxing and then I had eight days of training in the Pyrenees again to prepare and come back stronger for the second half.

Q: (Ralf Woodall - L'Equipe) Question for Stoffel, it's your first home grand prix. How do you feel knowing you'll have a grid penalty starting the weekend. And how confident are you starting the weekend with a new engine?

SV: First of all I'm very happy, extremely happy to be in Spa for the first time as a Formula One driver. Looking forward to see all the fans, a lot of family, a lot of friends will be here, so definitely excited for that. And yeah, on the racing front, the penalties were kind-of inevitable with the issues we had earlier this season. Every new part we bring to the car now is giving us grid penalties. It's a shame to start the weekend like that but with the weather here there's maybe a lot of opportunities possible. So, we'll focus and try to make the best of it.

Q: (Angelique Belokopytov – Autodigest) Stoffel, so it's your home race now, it's nothing new, you have a big media schedule. Isn't it sometimes too much? Are you too busy to be focussed on the weekend – is it not better to sometimes have a light schedule?

SV: I think I shouldn't complain. It's part of the job to do a lot of marketing, sponsor events with the team – but generally it's very well organised. Obviously this is a special race for us. It's normal I have a bit more work to do with the partners, with the media. In the end it doesn't distract me. As soon as we get to the track on Thursday, it's back to our normal schedules and really focussing everything we can on the race weekend.

Q: (Silvia Arias – Parabrisas) Max, when some incidents happen during the race, and there is a crash or something like what happened in Hungary, what are your feelings after that? Is it 'I'm not doing that again' or 'I'm fighting like hell and these things can happen.' Which are your feelings?

MV: You try to learn from it and from there on, maybe you analyse it once to see exactly, also from different camera angles. You know that from there on you know you have to go forwards and you try to forget it.

Q: (Lennart Bloemhof – Volkskrant) Question for Max, also about the incident with Daniel. Did you speak with Daniel afterwards – or maybe recently about it. Is the air clear now?

MV: Of course. Already straight after the race we had a talk and cleared all the air. We shared our opinions, then we had our holiday. I saw Daniel again today. At the end of the day, we are racing drivers. It's one race and we are not fighting for a World Championship. That's a different story. We just go on and try to score some points.

Q: (Adrian R Huber – Agencia EFE) Question for Max. From a very realistic point of view, what are your goals from now until the rest of the season?

MV: I think the approach is race-by-race and try to achieve the best you can. Especially after the first half I've had: you don't look at the championship position or whatever. You just try to do what you can do every single weekend and try to be closer to the top two teams and hopefully that will also bring us into a better position for next year.

Q: (Louis Dekker – NOS) Could you three in a row be the future of Formula One?

SV: Yeah, I think so! Hopefully one day we'll all fight it out in the front. It would be nice. As long as I'm winning.

Esteban?

EO: When all the other guys retire, we'll be in the front.

Does that history then, that you raced against each other, does that begin to count, or does it count already?

EO: We had good times together. I had good times with Max. Stoffel was a bit older, he's already an old guy

SV: Time for retirement...

EO: ... but no, I really want to race with those three in the future at the top. It will be something awesome. As long as I'm winning.

And Max, you feel like the future, right?

MV: To be honest, feel like the future? I just try to do the best I can every single weekend and hopefully that's enough, of course.

Part Two: Drivers – Valtteri BOTTAS (Mercedes), Kimi RÄIKKÖNEN (Ferrari), Felipe MASSA (Williams)

Q: Valtteri, you're the top scorer in the last six grands prix on 106 points. Eight more than Vettel, 16 more than Hamilton and the only man to finish on the podium on the last five in succession – the best streak of your career: how much more confidently do you start the second half of the season, compared to the first?

Valtteri BOTTAS: Definitely it is nicer, the start of the second half than the first half because I started this season with a new team, new environment, there was so many things for me to get used to and to learn, so now I can just get on with it. So, I'm looking forwards to the second half and nice to be back here in Spa.

Q: We're seeing a lot of renewal announcements coming through for Stoffel, we just had him here, Kimi obviously. When can we expect yours?

VB: Well yeah. First of all, congrats to Kimi and Stoffel for that. For me, there's no news yet, and we will tell you the news when there is some.

Q: Kimi, congratulations on your new Ferrari deal. Why is it the right thing for you and your career?

Kimi RÄIKKÖNEN: Well, I wouldn't do it if I wouldn't want to, and be happy with it and obviously the team feels the same way so, y'know...

Q: You've qualified third or higher on the grid at the last four races and you're tied three-all with Vettel in the last six qualifying sessions and obviously we all saw you had the pace to win in Hungary. Are we seeing the highest level of challenge from you since your return to Ferrari, do you think?

KR: I don't know. It's so difficult to... everybody has their own view of things and obviously we want to do well, we want to improve and I guess you always find things to do better and, that way, find more speed. Lately it's been a bit better, we've been feeling a bit more comfortable and been able to drive as we want and obviously the result suddenly looks a bit better. I'm confident we are doing the right things and getting where we want to be.

Q: Felipe, how are you feeling, what was the diagnosis that kept you out of the car in Hungary and are you confident it's all over now?

FM: Yeah, I feel good, I feel ready to get back in the car. I had a... I was feeling a little bit dizzy on that weekend. Vertigo is the name of what I had and unfortunately it's the first time I had this. It was a little bit of a strange feeling and unfortunately it happens in a race weekend and keeps me out of the car but I feel good now, ready to get back to the second part of the season and really hopeful we can do good races.

Q: It's been a bonus year in your career in some ways. It was around this time last year that you announced your decision to retire. Has this season given you a second wind. Do you think you'll be staying on again for 2018.

FM: Well, I was quite happy to be honest, in the way I was driving the car. The first part of the season, unfortunately I was a little bit unlucky with the result but I was quite happy with the way I am driving the car. And when I see that, I don't see the point not to carry on. So if I have an opportunity to stay in the position I believe is correct for me to stay, yes I believe maybe I can stay for another season. Otherwise not. I'm quite relaxed about my future in one way or the other, to be honest. So I think maybe just thinking about the races and we'll see what happens.

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

Q: (Flavio Vanetti – Corriere della Sera) To Kimi, do you think the Ferrari looks more at the experience you can grant, or that you are able to bring harmony inside the team?

KR: You'll have to ask them. Honestly, the only thing is I was interested to be here next year. I didn't really care what the rest is thinking. Obviously the team feels the same way. What are the reasons... you'll have to go and ask them. I don't know what else I could say.

Q: (Livio Oricchio – GloboEsporte.com) Valtteri, everybody says that the circuit seems to be more adapted to your car than the Ferrari but on the other hand, Pirelli surprised everybody by using the ultrasoft tyres here. In this competition, what do you project for your weekend here?

VB: I think we are more confident coming to this race than, for example, a track like Budapest. I think we have seen that on the very high downforce tracks Ferrari is very strong. They've been not bad at any circuit so we don't feel that we are favourites or anything but we feel we can be reasonably strong here and I'm sure it's going to be another tight battle and with the tyre compounds, luckily it's not quite as hot as last year so the soft compounds can actually be very good but it's (inaudible) to predict really so we will see once we have started practice and see how the tyres work. But I personally always rather go softer than too hard with the tyres so I'm happy for the decision.

Q: (Heikki Kulta – Turun Sanomat) To Valtteri and Kimi: two Finns on the podium in two successive races for the first time ever. Would it mean anything to you to make a new kind of history with a hat trick?

KR: Obviously we must try to win races. If you don't get that then you get the next positions and would it really make us happier? I don't think I know. I think you're happy if you win but less if you come second or third but obviously it's been great for Finns, for us, but I don't think it's something that you aim to purposely do or you get more satisfaction from that I think is purely if you do better than worse.

VB: Yeah, I think definitely to finish one-two would be better than two-three so but yeah, we are always there to try and win the race and not really focus on who is third or second. Of course, it would be nice.

Q: (Marco Privitera – LiveGP.it) Kimi, in Austria Sebastian said that Kimi is my favourite teammate for the next season. Do you have the same opinion? Do you think that Sebastian is your favourite teammate for the future?

KR: Yeah, I'm sure he is. I think we work very well together, as the whole team, a good way of working, but obviously I'm not the guy who decides who does what and obviously I have no idea what will happen in his case but hopefully all that stays how it is now and it would be perfect.

Q: (Graham Harris – Motorsport Monday, Motorsport Weekly) Kimi and Valtteri, one of you has been confirmed for next year, one of you is still waiting to be confirmed. You are both at the sharp end of the grid. Do

you think, Kimi, the fact that you've got next year out of the way and we won't be asking you these questions any more eases the pressure on you? And Valtteri, do you think that because you haven't been confirmed and you don't know what is actually happening next year this puts added pressure on you in addition to winning races?

VB: No, for me it doesn't make a difference. Coming to this weekend, not thinking about it. Like I've said before, I'm used to these situations over the last few years, always the same thing that there's no confirmation about next year so now that we start the race weekend with a practice tomorrow, it's not going to be in my mind, for sure, so I'm just going to focus on the driving and the weekend, getting the most out of the weekend so no pressure from there.

KR: I don't think it's serious, you know. Maybe this weekend again you guys will not ask at the next race but start again, so that wouldn't be a big surprise for me. Obviously it's more easy to deal with that side of the stuff and we can put all our effort into pure racing. It just doesn't change the end result, it doesn't guarantee better results or worse results. It doesn't work like that but it's a good thing to be done.

Q: (Dan Knutson – Auto Action, Speedsport) Felipe, where are the key areas the car needs to be improved to be a regular challenger for the podium?

FM: Well, I think we need to improve the car, especially from the downforce point of view so if you see that when you go to tracks like Budapest or maybe like city tracks, we are struggling a lot. And we saw that some of the teams, like maybe Renault... depends on the track, developing the car a little bit better than us, so definitely developing is very important from the first race until the last race so I think maybe developing is very important so we are pushing hard to make the car better, race by race. It hasn't been perfect, to be honest but we're just pushing harder to see if we can improve and make the right results that we need to do also on tracks where the car should be better like here maybe or maybe Monza. So yeah, we have so many things where we're fighting for one or two tenths. I know that it's really important not to lose any opportunity in terms of improving the car.

Q: (Gabriel Lima – Motorsport.com) Felipe Massa, I would like to know what you had, your illness exactly and how it was when you found out you could not race and how was it for you to watch the race on TV?

FM: Well, actually I had... it was like vertigo so I was feeling dizzy, not only in the car but also when I was laying down on the bed. For sure it happened in the race weekend, so I was also feeling it in the car, especially with so many G-forces. So then I stopped and I said exactly how I was feeling and it was not a good feeling to race so for sure I just decided... me together with some other... the doctors there, I decided that I was not feeling good to race. Then I went to Monaco on the Saturday evening and I watched the race there, at home. It was a bit strange to be honest but yeah, it was interesting also to watch the race there, just to see when I decided to stop, how it was going to be. I think I definitely preferred to be in the car, it's where you enjoy yourself. I feel good, I feel ready to get back in the car, that's the most important thing.

Q: (Heikki Kulta – Turun Sanomat) Valtteri, fitness-wise, which is more demanding: a duathlon or a Formula One race?

VB: It's completely different so you just can't compare. Driving, how you feel it physically, it's way different to running or cycling. Obviously both sports are demanding but in so different ways that it's difficult to compare.

Q: (Livio Oricchio – GloboEsporte.com) To all drivers: how do you imagine will be your flying lap on Saturday with cars that have a minimum 30 percent more downforce, tyres 25 percent wider and ultrasoft tyres?

KR: We've driven these cars all year so far; some circuits you feel that for sure you will go faster everywhere and obviously it's quite a high speed circuit so we expect to be feeling a bit faster but I think it's good for this place to have the grip and the speed through the corners and it makes it more exciting so I would guess that it's quite a nice feeling.

Q: Felipe, any corners that you're particularly looking forward to in these cars, any sequences?

FM: Well, I think it will feel similar to Silverstone. Silverstone is a track that is not different to how it is going to be in Spa so a lot of high speed corners, a lot of quick changes of direction so you will feel maybe similar to Silverstone. I think Eau Rouge will not be a corner that is very interesting because it will be too easy for all of the drivers, all of the cars, more or less like a straight but then, when you get to the second sector it will be quite interesting, a lot of high speed corners, quick changes of direction. Then it will be quite interesting and a good feeling for the drivers as well, like it was at Silverstone.

VB: I don't think there's much to add. It's definitely going to be fun like it always is here in Spa and like we saw at Silverstone with just more downforce, more grip, it is even more fun basically.

Q: (Luigi Perna – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Kimi, what is making you carry on racing, considering that you said that you would retire at the end of your contract with Ferrari 2015? It's because you have the same excitement as you had at the beginning or just because you have the right car to compete?

KR: It's purely the racing. The rest not but I enjoy racing and obviously I want to do well. If I did not feel that I can go fast I wouldn't be happy in myself. If I wasn't driving, I wouldn't be here. I have zero interest to waste my time or the team's time to be a part of it, it's not the most nicest place to just hang around. So the racing is the main thing. Yes, there's a lot of other sides of F1 but as long as the racing is the biggest part, then that's it and as long as I feel myself that I can

win races and fight for championships then that's fine. When I don't feel like that I will be the first guy to do something else.